

UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL
20 May 1986

LEGAL, MILITARY EXPERTS DEBATE CASEY MOVE
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WASHINGTON

CIA Director William Casey's public campaign against leaks could have a 'chilling effect' on news coverage and may be drawing unwanted attention to top secret information, media and military experts said Tuesday.

Casey has asked the Justice Department to consider prosecuting NBC News under a 1950 national security law for a report naming a Navy intelligence project the network said was compromised by accused spy Ronald Pelton, now on trial in Baltimore.

NBC News and the correspondent who reported the story declined comment Tuesday except to say the network's lawyers were meeting in New York.

Retired Adm. Gene LaRocque, director of the Center for Defense Information, a military policy 'think tank,' said Casey, by pressing the issue over the NBC report, may have given the Soviets unintended intelligence information.

'If this man Pelton did provide information to the Soviets as alleged, the Soviets now know through Mr. Casey's action that that information was highly sensitive, important and prejudicial to U.S. interests,' he said. 'Up to now the Soviets could only hope that they had received accurate information.'

The CIA declined comment on the assessment.

Jane Kirtley, executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, said Casey may be succeeding in intimidating the news media even before taking formal legal steps.

She said, 'That can have a chilling effect just as much as (formal legal action), but it's even harder to deal with.'

A network spokeswoman said it was NBC's understanding that the secret intelligence project, known as 'Ivy Bells,' had been reported before and U.S. intelligence experts said the NBC report did not appear to contain any revelations.

Attorney General Edwin Meese said the Justice Department would investigate Casey's complaint and most media organizations indicated they were waiting for government action before deciding to make any changes in newsgathering policy.

CBS News executive John Huddy said, 'I would certainly not want to publish or air anything that would cause the loss of life in a covert operation or a catastrophic setback in American intelligence.'

'At the same time, history has been such that you never know when you're being victimized, that maybe this is the first step in a move by this or any other administration to shut down the press.'

Casey's accusation against NBC News followed his charge earlier this month that The Washington Post, The New York Times, the Washington Times and Time and Newsweek magazines also had broken the obscure law with reports about intercepted Libyan communications.